

An Awakening: The Fayette Forest

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TUCKED AWAY in northwest Alabama is a little known gem that has not shone brightly in 25 years. The Fayette Experimental and Demonstration Forest is a 1,332-acre forest owned by Auburn University. It is to be used for the purposes of testing and demonstrating forest management practices that can be employed by private forest landowners and forest industry and providing educational opportunities to schools, the community and service organizations. This forest was once bustling with activity, particularly from the late 1940s to mid-1970s, when Sherman Whipple was at the helm of the forest. Since Mr. Whipple's untimely death, there has been no full-time professional forester on the property. Priorities changed and the Alabama Agricultural Experiment Station managed the forest for the past 25 years primarily for income generation.

In 1998, the School of Forestry and Wildlife Sciences (SFWS) became responsible for management of timber sale proceeds from the forest. In 1999, Dean Richard Brinker appointed a forest management committee to review the status of the Fayette Forest and four other forestry units (Autauga, Coosa, Barbour and North Auburn) and propose appropriate management of these forests in an attempt to revitalize their intended purpose. The Fayette Forest is the largest of the five forestry units and has received priority status because of immediate potential use of the forest for research, demonstration and educational activities.

In the spring of 1999, the forestry planning committees of Fayette, Lamar and Marion counties were approached about cooperating in the revitalization effort. The SFWS would allocate a portion of timber sale money to renewing use of the forest if the surrounding counties would utilize it for educational purposes. The county committees responded eagerly; hence a partnership was born. A local

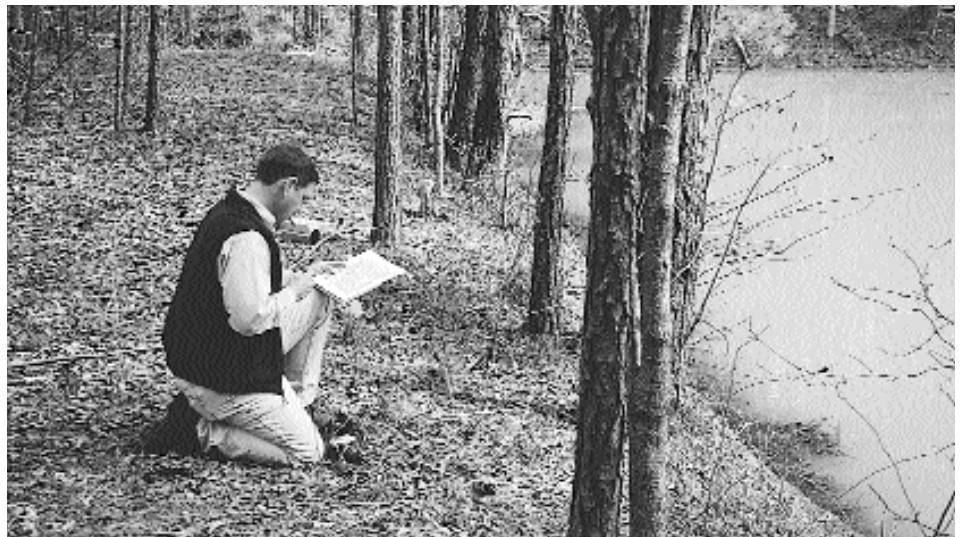
steering committee comprised of representatives from state and federal natural resource agencies, the Fayette Board of Education, the Alabama TREASURE Forest Association, county forestry planning committees, Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts, Wheelin' Sportsmen, and forestry consultants was formed to give local interests a hand in direction and use of the forest. Although the SFWS controls the forest, it is hoped there will develop a sense of local "ownership" and pride in the forest through input and cooperation in demonstration and education projects.

Managing the Forest

The first priority was to improve access to the forest by rebuilding over four miles of road. Turnouts and cross-drain culverts were installed on the existing road system. Then the road was graded, crowned and graveled. Most of the main road system is now in excellent condition, making the property accessible year-round. Additional roadwork is planned for next year. Seven heavy gauge steel pipe gates guard the entrances, pro-

tecting the roads from unauthorized use.

Wildlife management activities were non-existent, although the property had been hunted without permission for several years. The School wanted to regain control of the hunting activity while maintaining a healthy game population. Jesse Parrish, a local citizen involved with Wheelin' Sportsmen, inquired about leasing the property for handicapped hunting. The inquiry stimulated an idea. The SFWS contacted the Division of Wildlife and Freshwater Fisheries (formerly the Game and Fish Division) about cooperating with Auburn University in designating the forest as a Wildlife Management Area for handicapped hunting. After several revisions of the agreement, the Fayette WMA was officially designated in June 2000, with operation to begin in the 2000 hunting season. This agreement will benefit handicapped hunters and enhance game management on the forest. The Division will manage the hunting and assist the School in wildlife habitat improvement and management. Additionally, this WMA will provide



A landscape architect studies the location for the educational pavilion along the edge of the pond.

research opportunities for SFWS faculty that were not previously available.

Using the Forest for Education

Another exciting project on the Fayette Forest is the planned development of an Educational Area surrounding a small pond in the eastern portion of the property. U.S. Highway 43 splits the property, with about 200 acres lying east and 1,100 acres lying west of the highway. The 200-acre portion will be primarily utilized for small-scale demonstrations of forest resource related activities, educational trails, an open-sided educational pavilion and hopefully, one day, a full-fledged "classroom in the forest." Teachers in the Fayette County School System, the 4-H program, Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts and other educational/service groups have shown great interest in utilizing the property for educational opportunities. Teachers used in-service time this past summer to develop educational programs that will be implemented on the forest.

The dam and spillway of the small woods pond was rebuilt during the summer and will serve as the centerpiece of the educational area. The Fayette County Forestry Planning Committee received a \$20,000 Stewardship Grant (from forestry tag sales) to aid construction of the educational pavilion and educational trails. The SFWS has committed an additional \$25,000 of timber sale money

ed adjacent to the small pond, affords varied educational prospects. A master plan is being developed to guide the design and layout of facilities, parking and other parts of the infrastructure.

Future Plans

The 1,100 acres west of U.S. 43 will be used primarily for larger-scale forestry and wildlife habitat demonstrations. The forest has not been prescribed burned in over 25 years. There are numerous opportunities to show benefits of fire in this ecosystem, open the forest for improved wildlife habitat and to enhance the aesthetics of the forest. Stands will be thinned as appropriate and harvested areas regenerated using a number of different approaches. One or more areas may be planted in longleaf pine, as this area of Upper Coastal Plain soils lies in the longleaf's native range. An excellent long-term site preparation study exists on the property. Initiated in 1958 and replicated in 1997, the Fayette site preparation study illustrates the results of a range of six treatments, from no site preparation to intensive chemical site preparation with herbaceous weed control.

A Best Management Practices (BMP) demonstration is planned in cooperation with the Alabama Forestry Commission to show how to mark and cut along intermittent streams. Numerous opportunities exist for demonstrating cost-effective and environmentally sound road-building

methods. Roads are often an afterthought on private forestlands. Road design and layout should receive major consideration and be an integral part of the overall forest management plan. Outsloped roads, broad-based dips and grassed turnouts will be featured on secondary roads of the forest.

There are also many opportunities on the forest to demonstrate wildlife habitat management enhancement and improvement. Much of the forest currently consists of older mixed pine-hardwood stands. Many pine-dominated stands need to be prescribed burned to reduce fire hazard and to reduce the vegetation to a size that is accessible and palatable to several important wildlife species. One or more areas may be heavily thinned, treated with herbicide to reduce the hardwood understory and burned on a regular basis with the goal to create an open forest and good quail habitat. Other areas will be treated with herbicide and fire to improve whitetail deer and wild turkey habitat. Small hardwood bottoms and "stringers" will be maintained to protect water quality, increase diversity, and provide habitat for squirrels and other species. The diversity of the forest will provide habitat for a variety of songbirds and other non-game wildlife species.

A Work in Progress

The Fayette Experimental and Demonstration Forest is a work in progress. Like any gem, it must be shaped and polished before its full potential is apparent. After sufficient accomplishments have been made the forest will be submitted for consideration as a Demonstration TREASURE Forest. Landowners, school children and other citizens in the counties surrounding the Fayette Forest as well as the general public of Alabama will benefit from the reawakening and sustainable management of this forest.

For more information on or use of the Fayette Forest, contact Dr. Glenn Glover, School of Forestry and Wildlife Sciences, Auburn University, AL, 36830 (334-844-1019; glover@forestry.auburn.edu) or Warren Griffith, County Extension Agent, Fayette County, 103 First Avenue, NW, Suite 1, Fayette, AL 35555-0030 (205-932-8941; wgriffit@acesag.auburn.edu).



Dr. Richard Brinker (rear of photo), dean of the School of Forestry and Wildlife Sciences, assists the road crew in laying out a broad-based dip for demonstration purposes.